

**FACTS,
RELATING TO SLAVERY**

IN

THE WEST INDIES AND AMERICA,

CONTAINED IN

A LETTER

ADDRESSED TO

THE RIGHT HON. SIR ROBERT PEEL, BART.

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By **JOHN GLADSTONE, Esq.,**

OF LIVERPOOL.

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SECOND EDITION.

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A LETTER, &c.

SIR,

AMONG the many grave and important subjects which are expected to come under the consideration of his Majesty's Government, and which are likely to be fully discussed in the present session of Parliament, perhaps none will require to be investigated with greater care and attention than that of the present state of Slavery in our Sugar and Coffee Colonies.

The emancipation of slavery is loudly called for in every direction. Under the influence of certain popular leaders, the public mind has been greatly excited, and large bodies of individuals have been induced to enter warmly into their views. Though those individuals are generally unacquainted with the true state and merits of this question, they willingly yield themselves up

to a mistaken, but, I believe, on their part a well-intentioned zeal. Unfortunately, they look at this question in the abstract only ; they begin with the abhorrence of slavery, as opposed to a love of freedom existing in this favoured land ; they draw their inferences against the first as repugnant to the laws of nature and the habits of civilized life, whilst they are unaquainted with the negro character, and the state of society in these colonies ; they treat the subject as if the question now were, whether, or not, slavery ought to be one of choice, and not as a state of subordination which has existed for so long a period of time, that in these colonies it has become interwoven with their cultivation and existence ; that it has not only been authorized and protected, but encouraged by acts of the British legislature at various periods of its existence, by which the planters have acquired in their people the right of property ; property as effectually sanctioned and secured to them by the law of the land as any freehold estate in Great Britain can be to its owner.

I think it must be admitted, that in all countries situated within the tropics, where society is

formed of the aboriginal inhabitants, it has been found existing either under a despotic form of government, where slavery has ever prevailed in its worst forms and effects, or in a state of savage life,—in both, the extreme heat and relaxing influence of the climate produce in the inhabitants a disposition to indolence and an aversion to labour: there, nature yields in prolific abundance all that is required to provide for the common necessities of life, with little exertion on their part; and, as compared with the state of the inhabitants of colder climates, their wants are few, and almost confined to food, with slight clothing, whilst they are either unacquainted with, or do not desire to possess, the refinements and luxuries of Europe, or of the colder climates of the East.

These facts apply more directly to the state of society in Africa, from whence these colonies were originally supplied with their labouring classes. In them the negroes and their descendants, whether in a state of slavery, and subject to compulsive work, or in that of freedom, and at liberty to follow their own desires, are found to retain the same aversion to labour, and with it a similar love of ease and relaxation, as exists

throughout Africa. Neither has any sufficient stimulus yet been found to counteract these propensities, or induce them willingly to engage generally in the ordinary exertions of active life ; at the same time it is to be remarked, that nature has given to the negroes, as to the other inhabitants of the tropics, peculiar constitutions, and the power of labouring beneath a vertical sun, while the natives of colder climates are incapable of such labour, and, when so exposed, eventually sink under it.

The constitutional love of ease and indolence, which forms so prominent a part of the negro character, is blended with a lightness of heart and a love of amusement which admit of being easily gratified, and thus increase their means of happiness ; but at the same time, whilst it limits their desires, it opposes greater difficulty, when the attempt is made to create in their minds more enlarged views of human improvements or mental enjoyment ; whilst, on the other hand, when well treated, it leads them to pass their time in a state of contentment and comparative happiness, particularly where, as in these colonies, their labour is moderate and

regulated by law, where all their wants, whether in infancy or old age, in health or in sickness, are duly and effectually provided for them by their owners, without care or exertion on their part. Indeed, many instances exist of domestic slaves, to whom freedom had been given, returning to their masters, desiring to be replaced in their service, that they might again enjoy the advantage of having all their wants provided for. Slavery is thus shorn of its chief evils, but this state of labour is not the less necessary, whilst the colonies continue to be cultivated, since it is well known, that the negroes will not work in the field from choice. Such is their aversion to out-door work, that it is understood no instance can be found, in these colonies, of free negroes being induced to labour in the field for hire: on the contrary, they submit, in preference, to every privation, and are often so inconsiderate in their general conduct, that when they can procure the means they pass their time in idleness and dissipation. Where, however, it is the duty of the slaves to work in the field, such is their disposition and sense of that duty, that the labour is cheerfully performed, without injury to their health or comforts.

Could free labour, sufficient for every branch of cultivation, be obtained for hire, with a dependance upon its continuance, it would be decidedly for the interest of the planter to prefer it, for even though the price might be high, it must be greatly so, before it could amount to the heavy expense of the present system; but, since experience has shown, that no dependance can be placed on a regular supply, and that when the canes were planted, people might not be found to reap them, such a system would necessarily be followed by the abandonment and extinction of cultivation, as was experienced in Cayenne, when freedom was given to the negroes there, during the most intemperate period of the French revolution, and which state of freedom was afterwards followed by the restoration of slavery under increased disadvantages, when, though the interval was short, their numbers were found to be reduced one-half or more, by civil strife and dissention, degrading cruelties, unbounded licentiousness, and disease.

But, supposing these difficulties (which, to me, appear insurmountable) could be overcome, so as to admit of a plan for carrying emancipation into effect, by the substitution of free for com-

pulsory labour, I will proceed to consider the propositions that have been made for arriving at such a result. And, first, it has been proposed, that all the children born in slavery should be free after a given early period. This leads to the inquiry how such a measure is to be carried into effect. The law of the land has vested the right to the labour of the children, when able to work, in the owners of the parents; requiring, in return, a due care and protection of them during infancy; but, if taken from them, it follows, that they must either be compensated, or their just and legal rights rejected. If compensation be given, its amount cannot be regulated by any existing rule of valuation, because this change of system strikes at the root of the existence of the whole of the planters' property. It would gradually deprive them of their means for labour, which would at last wholly terminate with the lives of their people: in fact, it may be said, that it would virtually do so at a much earlier period; for, as the better informed and more useful died, those left behind would be less efficient, and at last become more a burden than a benefit to their owners.

It is also well deserving of consideration, whether the thus giving freedom to the children would not powerfully excite the minds and feelings of the adult slaves. Would they not be disposed to contend, that their rights or claims to release were alike strong with those of their children? Would not an impatient desire of freedom be the immediate consequence? and, being withheld, would they not be induced to endeavour to procure it by force and insurrection, which, in that case, might well be expected to be followed by the most horrible consequences, ending, in all probability, in the extermination of the white inhabitants, and the destruction of all existing property, as was so fatally witnessed on similar excitements in the island of St. Domingo?

But let us suppose it possible, that such scenes could be averted, and proceed to inquire how those children, to whom freedom is proposed to be given, are to be reared and provided for. It cannot be supposed that this will be done by their parents, who are occupied in the service of their owners, or by nurses, as at present, provided by their masters, who are no longer to have an in-

terest in them: what then is to become of these free children? Do not the existing difficulties show that the proposed measure is alike visionary and impracticable? and will not the minds of all men, who allow themselves to think dispassionately on this most interesting subject, arrive at the same conclusion? It is a subject, I venture to assert, which involves the comforts, the happiness, the property and the lives, of a large and important body of our fellow-subjects, as well as the well-being of their people, from whose interests their own are, and must continue to be, inseparable.

The next proposition for consideration is, that of a more general and gradual plan of emancipation, embracing the freedom of all who are now in a state of slavery in our colonies. This course is eagerly urged upon the legislature with a reckless impatience, by that numerous class of individuals to whom I have already referred; a class who, having no pecuniary interest or property of their own at stake; no interest beyond that produced by misplaced or mistaken feelings, —pursue their course with persevering ardour,

Here I must beg it may be kept in view, that this is a question involving property, which, even when taken at a low estimate, considerably exceeds in value the sum of one hundred millions of pounds sterling ; and is it to be supposed, that in these times, when the outcry for the reduction of existing taxation is so general and vehement, the public, for the purpose of gratifying these advocates for emancipation, will, on such grounds, consent to a heavy increase of their burdens ? Is it likely, even if measures for emancipation were to be adopted by the legislature, that, however powerful and just the claims of the planters may be, such a course would be found practicable ? I hesitate not to say, that to entertain such an expectation would be but a delusion ; and if such were to be the alternative, it would be better for the planters, at once to make up their minds to embrace that ruin, and submit to the injustice of their fate, which would thus be forced upon them by a misguided British public. But I do trust and believe, that good sense, calm consideration, and cooler judgment will yet avert such disastrous and fatal consequences,

To fix a period for emancipation, or how to de-

cide upon a plan that is intended to lead gradually to such a result, and that within a given time, would, I conceive, be considered so pregnant with danger in our colonies, that it must immediately lead to their abandonment by the white inhabitants; they would be impressed with the belief, that the negroes would conclude, that if they were to have their freedom given to them at a fixed, but remote period, such a stipulation afforded no reason satisfactory to them why they should not obtain it immediately. It would be vain to answer, that it was necessary their minds and habits, in order to enable them to value or enjoy such a change, should first be prepared for it. It must be recollected, that the proportion of the negro to the white population runs, in the different colonies, from eight up to twenty negroes for one white. The negroes would be alive to their power to take the means for accomplishing this object into their own hands, when the alarming consequences I have already stated might be expected to ensue; for no military force could be found, or spared, sufficient to afford protection against such evils. The deserted, desolated colonies would thus pass into the hands of the ne-

groes, lost to their owners and to the mother country, with all their important advantages; such as, the extensive markets they furnish for our manufactures, the employment they provide for a large proportion of our shipping, the extensive supplies of sugar and coffee they produce for our consumption, (now become almost necessities of life,) and the large proportion of public revenue drawn from the productions and trade of these colonies, with the probability that, when they were left in the hands of the negroes, we might soon expect to see such a despotism established in each, such a slavery, though under another name, resumed, with all its evils, as is now witnessed in St. Domingo; whilst the cultivation and trade thus sacrificed could only be expected to lead to the extension and improvement of the colonies of other nations, where slavery is not likely or expected to undergo any change.

These, Sir, are neither rash, light, or hasty views and conclusions. They will, I believe, be confirmed to you by every one who has enjoyed opportunities, and availed themselves of those opportunities, to study the negro character, and to become acquainted with the state and habits

of society in the colonies. Alas! if the repentance, if the remorse of those who had forced them into such a state, should come when too late, what would it avail in the midst of such a catastrophe?

During the existence of the slave trade, I believe that many planters in these colonies were guilty of disgraceful acts of cruelty to their people, and that they frequently required labour from them that was unreasonable and oppressive; but when that trade fortunately ceased, (a measure that had, I believe, been previously applied for by the planters of Jamaica,) and that no further supplies of negroes could be obtained, the planters, generally, soon became aware how much it was their interest, as well as their duty, to treat their slaves with increased care and attention; and also to encourage marriage among them, as the best means for upholding their numbers and strength, on which the cultivation of their estates wholly depended. This course led gradually to a unity of interests; the planters, or their representatives, lived surrounded by their people, confident in their attachment, whilst their lives were always in their power. Thus, a system now

exists of kinder treatment, and of regulated labour, alike beneficial to both, which has been made still more effectual by the wholesome regulations adopted in the conquered colonies under the directions of the Government, and by that authority recommended to, and pressed upon, the local legislatures of the old islands, where, in part, they have also been acted upon.

I do not mean to say, that solitary instances of cruelty or individual oppression may not still be met with within our colonies, though I do take upon me to say, that they are comparatively few, and “far between.” But I beg to be permitted to ask, if human nature is not, in fact, the same every where, when our worst passions are excited to action; and is it not almost impossible, even in this country, where philanthropy and love for our fellow-creatures so much abound, to look into a newspaper, and not find the report of barbarous murders; of brutal, and often unprovoked, assaults, in which both sexes are too apt to engage, and frequently the fruits of drunkenness and profligacy; of robberies and plunder, of acts of despotism and cruelty, committed by one class of masters against their ap-

prentices, by others against their seamen, both professing to act under the protection of the civil law. Nay, even at the military drum head, and on the quarter deck of our ships of war, under the still more extensive powers given by martial law, are not instances of the abuse of that power also to be found? Can it then be a matter of surprise, that in a climate where the passions are warm, more easily excited, and perhaps less under restraint, actions offensive to good morals, should sometimes occur, or that instances should occasionally be found, of conduct repugnant to humanity, and contrary to the existing laws and regulations of these colonies?

But it may be asked, is slavery then to be interminable in our colonies, or what is the course meant to be followed? I humbly conceive, it is not for me to attempt to say when a system should terminate which Almighty God, in the divine wisdom of his over-ruling providence, has seen fit to permit in certain climates since the origin and formation of society in this world; whilst in other climates, where man is found in a more civilized state, and influenced by different feelings, the same purposes have been

answered by those distinctions which rank and subordination have created. But I do venture to think, that the measures which have been already adopted by the legislature, (founded on Mr. Canning's well-known resolutions, which were passed unanimously in both Houses of Parliament, and for which I voted, having then had the honour of being a member of the Lower House,) and now acted upon in the conquered colonies, measures which have for their objects to ameliorate the state of slavery, to improve the condition and raise the character of the people with a view to future, but as yet undefined, emancipation, when it may be found both safe and practicable, with a just regard to the interests of their masters, will accomplish all that can, at present, be attained. After a reasonable time has been allowed for the results of these experiments, if found successful, (which, I trust, they will prove to be,) it is to be expected, that the legislatures of the old colonies will see the propriety of adopting similar measures, as they have already done to a given extent, without the necessity for forcible interference on the part of Parliament; for it

does appear to me, that such an interference is to be deeply deprecated. Were it to be adopted, it would, in all human probability, lead to one of two results,—one, to impress the minds of the negroes with the belief, that the British Legislature, of whom they know the King is the head, desired to give them their freedom, but that their masters, from whom the members of their assemblies were chosen, unjustly withheld the boon. With such impressions, so supported and encouraged, are they not to be expected to throw off their allegiance, and rise in rebellion, which could only lead to the most awful and destructive results? Or, if such were not the case, the other alternative would be, that the planters, anxious to protect what they believed to be their interest, would use every means in their power, and secretly, if necessary, to thwart and oppose the measures adopted here, the consequences of which would, probably, be found most injurious to the welfare of the negroes, and, counteracting the views and intentions formed in this country, prevent the application of a salutary remedy.

In pursuing this subject, I would beg to draw your attention to the present state of slavery in

the United States of America. In that republican government, so jealous of freedom, and of the rights of its citizens; with a people every where advocating humane and liberal principles, individually watching over their privileges, to whom the distinctions of rank and subordination are almost invidious; where no want of strong religious feeling, nor of a sense of duty exists; where institutions and societies abound, having for their object to promote the temporal and eternal interests of the community;—yet there even slavery is found to exist on a far more extended scale than with us! And in those states where the climate admits of the culture of the sugar cane, the labour of the slaves, during crop time, is more constant and severe than in our colonies. Yet these warm friends of freedom justify their conduct, by advocating the necessity for the existence of slave labour in certain climates, where it can be beneficially employed, but where they know the negro, if free, would not labour from choice, and where the white inhabitants are constitutionally incapable of doing so. You, therefore, hear of no petitions; of no applications, from the people to their legislature, to put a period to the

existence of slavery, such as our Parliament continues to be incessantly assailed with. And why? The truth is, they live in the same land, where all have constant opportunities of observation, and therefore become intimately acquainted with the character and habits of the negro, the nature of his gratifications, and his ruling passions. This knowledge leads them to acquiesce in the existing state of things, as necessary and unavoidable, whilst they know that the comforts and wants of the slaves are cared for and attended to.

At an early period, when the midland states of America, then forming a part of the British Empire, were thinly inhabited, and without sufficient means for cultivation, negro slaves were introduced, and their numbers thereafter gradually and greatly increased; but, as the white population extended itself, and the climate admitted of their performing field labour, without hazard or difficulty, the work of the negroes became of less use or value. Under these circumstances many of the proprietors sold their people to be removed to the Southern States, where cultivation, such as, from the nature of the climate, *they* only could

be employed in, was rapidly extending, whilst others, more disinterested, and acting under the influence of humane feelings, gave freedom to their slaves, when they no longer required their labour. This led to a very considerable increase in that class of individuals; but it was soon found that their constitutional love of indolence, and consequent aversion to labour, with the licentious habits of not a few, caused them, in stead of being a benefit to society, to become, in many instances, a nuisance, and a burden to the community at large. The consequence was, that not many years ago, plans were formed, and arrangements made for the removal of the most objectionable part of these free people to Africa and to Hayti.*

I shall now take upon me, Sir, to call your attention, and that of our warm-hearted abolitionists, to the state and circumstances of society among the lower classes in the United Kingdom. Let them, among other quarters where large bodies of the working classes are congregated.

* Some were sent to the first, and a greater number to the last, from whence a part of them have since returned to the United States, reduced to destitution and wretchedness.

together, visit those immense buildings in which the manufactures in cotton and in metals are carried on ; let them encounter the increased degree of heat, and offensive, if not unwholesome, effluvia with which they abound ; let them behold the squalid looks of most of the people that labour within them, pinched to earn enough to purchase the common necessities of life for themselves and their families, whilst they are generally strangers to its comforts ; let them then endeavour to look around them, and throughout the kingdom, at the working classes generally, and see how many among them there are who are willing to work, but cannot find employment in either our manufacturing, trading, or agricultural districts, and who are thus idle without a choice, broken down in spirit, and often in the character of paupers, forced to seek for parish relief, accepting the scanty pittance which barely sustains life, but received in idleness that too often leads to demoralization and crime, whilst a portion of that pittance, so supplied, is wrung from the hardly-earned fruits of the labour of those who are employed, and who, in their turn, are too frequently brought to the necessity of applying for similar aid ;

let them visit Ireland, and enter the hut of the poor peasant, where no poor laws exist to aid or diminish his wants ; let them examine his hollow looks, his wretched clothing, insufficient to cover his nakedness, his want of employment, though willing to work, and his ignorance of both his rights and his duties ; let them examine his dwelling, inhabited promiscuously by his family and his pigs, all partaking of the same food, and that too often in scanty supply, where, in untoward seasons, when prematurely exhausted, he has been left to starve and perish, unheeded and uncared for !

Let me next call upon our philanthropists to visit those colonies, which they have so severely calumniated, and there carefully examine the state of the negro's comforts, arrangements, dispositions, condition, labour, and general treatment ; but let them not take the reports of others, who have already misled too many by misrepresentation :—When they have done these things, let them compare the negro's state with that of the lower classes here, and then determine which calls most loudly for their benevolent efforts in their favour ! Of the results I entertain, no doubt ; but

I may be told, the slave in our colonies works from compulsion, the labourer here from choice. Granted; and I beg to ask, what is that choice? Is it not either to submit to labour, which exhausts his strength and health for a bare subsistence, or to leave it and starve, or become degraded in his own mind by the acceptance of the scanty pittance which parish relief affords? I ask, can this be a desirable state of things, and how much does it fall short of positive wretchedness? Then, surely, here is an ample field at home for the exertions and the sympathies of the benevolent and well-disposed who interest themselves so much in the well-being of others.

Let me now call the attention of those who have influenced the Government to abolish the Sunday morning markets, in the conquered colonies, where the negroes were accustomed to carry their vegetables, and other productions of their domestic industry for sale, and who now call loudly for compelling the colonial legislatures to adopt similar measures; (whilst to their conduct in doing so, I desire to attach no blame,) let me invite them to visit Covent-garden, and other similar markets on a Sabbath morning, where they

will find all the people, up to eleven o'clock, busily employed, as on any other day of the week, selling their fruits, foreign as well as domestic, their flowers, their roots, and their vegetables; and if they find I am correct in this statement, let them take shame to themselves for being occupied with attempts at reforming in distant parts of which they have no personal knowledge, and neglecting the scenes that are passing under their eyes and in the very front of the church!

It may be asked, have I any means to suggest, or course to propose, by which the public may become better informed on such important and interesting subjects, so connected with the state of these colonies. It does appear to me, that effectual means for satisfying the public mind, for obtaining information for the ignorant, putting to rest the clamours that have gone abroad, and for doing justice to the conduct and characters of the unfortunate planters, would be found, if three or more able, intelligent, and disinterested gentlemen were selected by the government, and sent to these colonies, with full authority to visit the whole, to examine the state of society there, to make themselves acquainted

with the character and habits of the negroes, the treatment they receive from their masters, the nature and extent of their labour, the provision made for them at all times and under all circumstances, the progress that has been made towards raising their condition, the state of their feelings, whether contented or otherwise with their labour and their duties, and what religious instruction has been provided for them. Let them then consider well what safe and practical course they can take upon themselves to recommend to the Government and the Legislature, consistent with the objects now under consideration. When the public have such a report before them, I do humbly conceive they will be more competent to form a correct judgment on this, which to them must at present appear a difficult and complicated subject; whilst the legislature would be enabled to arrive at the possession of such a body of facts, as would, after a calm and dispassionate consideration of the whole case, lead to safe and judicious conclusions.

My friends, and those connected with me, are aware that I have a considerable vested interest in plantations and in the people who cultivate

them in two of these colonies. This fact, when more generally known, may, perhaps, lead many to receive these statements from my pen with an increased degree of jealousy which can not surprise me. My desire is to arrive at the truth, and I do trust that you, Sir, together with an impartial and candid public, will not reject them because they may, in one sense, be said to come from an interested quarter.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your faithful and obedient servant,

JOHN GLADSTONE.

To the

Right Hon. Sir ROBERT PEEL, Bart.

&c. &c.